The Bridge From Then to Now: Tibetan Elders Living in Diaspora

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Abstract
This study presents how older Tibetan refugees have adapted to changing social and economic conditions in India. Participant observation and open-ended interview questions were used to explore life experiences of 14 older Tibetans living in India who participated in this study. Findings revealed that, after having to abandon familiar environments, these participants underwent harsh times in India but have adapted well. They have secured meaningful lives for themselves. Availability of children and institutional resources has proved beneficial at old age. Participants with children perceived that they were well cared for, which added to their satisfaction with present circumstances. However, those without children did not have any source of support and were dissatisfied. Religious activity was important for these participants. The ability to freely practice religion contributed to their satisfaction in exile. These findings are instructive for the treatment and acceptance of refugees throughout the world by contributing to the field of refugee aging and adaptation.

Keywords
older Tibetans, old people’s homes, Tibetan diaspora, adaptation, caregiving

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The People’s Republic of China (PRC) occupied Tibet in 1951 (Hao, 2000; Goldstein, 1989, 2006; International Commission of Jurist, 1960). From 1913 to 1951, Tibet enjoyed status as a de facto independent nation. Until 1959, very few Tibetans entered India, because His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, still resided in Tibet and controlled its internal politics. After the flight of the Dalai Lama, many thousands of Tibetans escaped their country and entered India, Nepal, and Bhutan, where they sought political asylum. Their migration and subsequent life in exile brought about many changes, as traditional Tibetan livelihoods and social structures were no longer possible. Even today, Tibetans continue to flee Tibet. It is estimated that between 2,000 and 3,000 refugees risk their lives every year to make the arduous journey across the Himalayas from Tibet through Nepal to reach India, a home from the repression they faced in Tibet (International Campaign for Tibet, 2005).

The current generation of older Tibetans represents the first wave of Tibetans aging in diaspora. This article presents the aging and adaptation experiences of older Tibetans living in India grounded in a life course perspective. As a young Tibetan born in exile, as well as a gerontology student, I believe that the study of older Tibetans living in diaspora is long overdue and that an understanding of their lives and adaptation offers insights important to the arena of refugee and immigrant aging.

**Tibetan Demography**

The Tibetan Government in Exile contended that in the 1950s the population of Tibet was six million and that it remains at six million today. However, the PRC suggests that only 2.8 million Tibetans live in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) (Childs, 2003). The TAR constitutes only half of the landmass of ethnic Tibet. Hao (2000) reported that, according to China’s 1990 census, there were 4.6 million Tibetans living in the PRC. The Exile Government estimated that 85,000 Tibetans live in India, 14,000 live in Nepal, and 12,000 live in North America and Europe (Planning Council, 2000). Tibetans 60 years and older constitute 13.4% of the total diasporic population (Planning Council, 2000; Planning Commission, 2004). Life expectancy of exile Tibetans was 65 years in 1990 (Childs, Goldstein, Jiao, & Beall, 2005).

**Tibetan Society: Past and Present**

Traditional Tibetan society reflected a balance between centralization and decentralization (Goldstein, 1971c). Under the aegis of the Central Government, monasteries and aristocrats owned more than half of Tibetan land (Goldstein,
Monasteries, aristocrats, and the Central Government had *miser* (translation: serfs or subjects) who worked and paid taxes to them. All nomads and farmers were *miser* and belonged to a lord and this relationship was hereditary (Goldstein, 1971a, 1971b).

In addition to a stratified society, Tibetan family structure was patriarchal. Parents exerted control over their children with regard to marriage and property ownership (Goldstein & Beall 1981; 1997). A typical Tibetan family consisted of parents, unmarried children, and/or one or more married children with spouses. Culturally, children were taught to respect, obey, and assist their parents. On reaching adulthood, children took over the responsibility of the family and allowed their aging parents to prepare for their next life by intensifying their religious activities.

Traditional Tibetan society and family structure may no longer be possible. Tibetans who continue to live in Tibet experience a diminished ability to maintain traditional Tibetan society, as they exist under the rule of the PRC, which supports neither the traditional family structure nor emphasis on religious activities. Tibetan society in exile is affected by the refugee experience. Tibetan refugees forced to abandon their country, experienced psychosocially taxing hardships, such as leaving family members behind, losing social ties, fearing getting caught by PRC authorities, and many have experienced various forms of abuse during and after their journey from Tibet (Dolma et al., 2006; Mercer, Ager, & Ruwanpura, 2005; Mills et al., 2005). Because of the harsh circumstances experienced in Tibet, hardships of leaving family behind, and difficult journey into exile, it is not surprising that studies have documented the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and anxiety among Tibetan refugees of various ages (Servan-Schreiber, Lin, & Birmaher, 1998; Holtz, 1998; Mills et al., 2005). Despite psychosocial problems and pressures, Tibetan refugees exemplify a successful refugee story because they have lived exceptionally well as a refugee group in their respective host nations. Tibetans have attained education in diaspora. The literacy rate among Tibetan youth in India is greater than 95% (Bhatia, Dranyi, & Rowley, 2002). The Tibetans continue to survive as a distinct ethnic group, in fact, some have done quite well economically living in diaspora and have adapted to their host nation (Klieger, 1992; Montcastle, 1997; von Welck & Bernstorff, 2004).

As stated earlier, studies on exiled Tibetans reveal that Tibetans have successfully adapted to their host nations, citing their economic stability and the rising educational level of its younger generation. However, we know little of how the first generation of Tibetans fared in exile. No known studies have documented the lives of older Tibetans who faced challenges of adjusting quickly to a new environment. It is important to study the first generation of Tibetans who have
aged in exile because only the older Tibetans can adequately and appropriately explain their life in Tibet and how their lives have changed because of the refugee experience, as well as how they have adapted to the changing and dynamic century. They represent an important repository of knowledge regarding Tibetan life in exile, in addition to being a bridge connecting the younger generation of Tibetans born in exile to their Tibetan roots. Thus because of the special place that older Tibetan refugees hold in the history of Tibetan diaspora as well as the lack of data on older Tibetans living in diaspora, this study was conducted to explore experiences of aging and social and economic adaptation of older Tibetans who grew old in India.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was framed using Elder’s life course perspective rather than acculturation theories (Berry, 1997, 2001) because life course perspective allows examination of adaptation using broader concepts of historical, geographical, and cultural contexts (Elder, 1975, 1998). This framework fits with the goal of the study to understand how elder Tibetans have lived in Tibet, aged in diaspora, and have adapted to their new lives in India throughout their life span. Acculturation theories emphasize the cultural aspects of adaptation such as changes that occur when a minority culture comes in contact with the host culture. Acculturation may be an issue for Tibetan diaspora, however, this was not the focus of this study.

The life course perspective was utilized in this study because it captures the depth and breadth of human experience over a lifetime and acknowledges human agency and linked lives between people (Elder, 1975, 1998; Ferraro, 2001; Hareven 1994). It incorporates adaptation as a part of human development and aging and recognizes individuals’ life events and life experiences, thereby making it possible to study adaptation from different perspectives of time, context, and culture.

**Method**

**Research Sites**

This study was approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board. During the summer of 2006, participants were interviewed from three locations near Dehradun, North India. The three locations included two Tibetan settlements, Dickyiling and Rajpur, and one nonsettlement city, Mussoorie. These three sites were chosen because of their proximity to one another, which
made it possible for a single interviewer to conduct the study. Dickyiling and Rajpur are popular Tibetan settlements in North India and were founded in 1961 and 1965 respectively (Settlements in Exile, 2007). In both settlements, Tibetan handicraft centers were established to employ Tibetans. Mussoorie, on the other hand, became home to many Tibetans who subsist through the sweater business.

Both settlements include monasteries, a health clinic, and a school. Close proximity to monasteries allows older Tibetans to actively engage in daily religious activities. Transportation from these two settlements to Dehradun and other places is possible with buses and taxis. Numerous restaurants and grocery stores make the settlements self-sufficient. In addition, vegetable and milk sellers travel to the residents’ homes each day.

The settlement of Rajpur includes two nonpay retirement homes for older Tibetans who do not have any children or relatives to care for them and who cannot afford to live on their own. The retirement homes are called Old People’s Homes (OPHs). These two OPHs were established in the early 1970s and are run by the Tibetan Homes Foundation. About 49 older Tibetans live there. The OPHs are similar to nonpay Old Age Homes in India, which are funded by private donations and government assistance (Liebig, 2003). As a non contributory institution, the OPH meets only the most basic needs of residents, and residents actively engage in the workings of the OPHs to cut down on costs (Liebig, 1999). Similarly, older Tibetans in OPHs perform basic chores such as cleaning their room and washing their clothes.

Gaining admission into the OPH is a long procedure that involves proving that the older adult is poor and has no children or relatives to fulfil caregiving roles. This procedure may be longer and harder than necessary because of a long-standing Tibetan belief that children and younger relatives should care for their older family members.

Recruitment

To conduct the study in the OPHs, the first author (TW) obtained permission from the OPH director to recruit interview participants and introduced herself to the matrons. Matrons oversee the welfare of the residents by ensuring that meals are provided on time, that the health of the residents is maintained and, in instances in which an older resident is ill, by delivering meals, assisting with washing clothes, and cleaning a resident’s room. Formal introductions with the matrons and show of respect for their position, allowed TW to move freely around the OPHs, visit and observe residents, and conduct interviews. In the first OPH, TW talked with residents and asked them to share their experiences. Some were uncomfortable
being interviewed and declined an invitation to participate. In the second OPH, the matron helped recruit participants. She may have felt that she could better choose participants who were healthier and talkative.

Recruitment of older Tibetans living in Dickyiling and Mussoorie was done using a snowball method. These participants were easier to recruit because they were living in the community. All participants agreed to be interviewed once the purpose of the study was explained to them. The recruitment of participants from both the OPH and the community was based on convenience sampling and thus it is not entirely representative of older Tibetans living in the region.

**Interviews and Data Analysis**

After making the initial contact, TW explained the purpose of the study and answered questions that arose. All participants agreed to have their interviews tape-recorded. A semistructured interview schedule was used and questions were based on the life course perspective. Thus participants were asked to discuss their experiences in Tibet, such as their livelihoods and the lives of their parents in Tibet, their reasons for leaving Tibet, their experiences related to coming into exile, and the story of their journey to India. Participants were asked several questions relating to their life experiences while living in India and the changes in their lives during the different decades of residence in their host nation. Additional questions inquired about their present circumstances, how they came to the place where they were living, the support that they received from their children or other entities, and their different concerns about their old age and their situation in diaspora. During the interview, some questions were repeated or rephrased for clarity and understanding.

Interviews for participants from Dickyiling and Mussoorie took place in their homes and at their convenience. Participants from the OPH were interviewed either in their rooms or at public places in the OPH. All interviews were conducted in Tibetan, notes were taken during the interview, and reflexive interview notes were made on completion of individual interviews. TW translated and transcribed all tape recordings verbatim from Tibetan to English, as she is fluent in both languages.

All transcribed interviews were analyzed by both authors using open and axial coding (Bernard, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During open coding, transcription data were broken down, compared, categorized, and conceptualized using line-by-line coding. The fractured data were then sorted using axial coding and then grouped into specific themes relating to context, conditions, action, and consequences and were consolidated together into major themes. Field notes were compared with the transcription to ensure that all data were
taken into consideration for analysis. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms are used when quoting any participant’s comments.

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics

Participants were from Dickyiling, Rajpur, and Mussoorie and had lived in India since the 1960s. Fourteen older Tibetans participated in this study, and their ages ranged from 65 to 84 years (Table 1). Eight participants were female, and 6 were male. Six participants lived in the Old People’s Home (OPH) in Rajpur, while 8 resided in community settings in Dickyiling and Mussoorie. Of the 6 OPH participants, 1 was still married, 3 were widowed, and 2 had never married because they previously had lived as monks in Tibet and continued their vow of celibacy in exile. Of the 8 participants in Dickyiling and Mussoorie, 6 were still married, and 2 were widowed. These 6 participants were couples and were interviewed together.

Six OPH participants had no children: 2 were monks, 1 woman never had a child, and the other 3 had children, all of whom died in India because of childhood illnesses. Eight other participants had children and other younger relatives.
Older Tibetan refugees living in India have spent their lives in two very different countries and cultures and under different socioeconomic conditions. In this study, 14 such cases are presented. Using a life course framework, the refugee life experiences are presented below under the following themes: life in Tibet, hardships of fleeing one’s homeland, experiences while living in India, changing relationships with children/relatives, and nostalgia for home.

**Life in Tibet**

Gyalpo, aged 77, was inducted as a monk at the age of 9. His father and maternal uncle were Tibetan government officials, indicating that perhaps he was from an aristocratic family, whereas other participants were from serf families. In Tibet, aristocratic families were responsible for sending one son to serve in the government (Goldstein, 1971c). Namgyal, aged 70, was also a monk in Tibet. Only one participant, Sonam, aged 77, was a landless servant, while Dornam, aged 72, and Pema, aged 75, were monastic subjects working as agropastoralist (nomad-farmer, *samadok* in Tibetan). They subsisted mostly by working on the land growing barley, black peas, and grains along with rearing animals. Because these 2 participants were monastic subjects, they paid taxes to the monastery.

All others were either nomads (*dokpa* in Tibetan) in Tibet. The nomadic lifestyle included rearing animals for milk, wool, and meat. Animals were also used for transportation. Nomads subsisted through bartering, an activity conducted primarily by men of the family. Women were mainly involved in making products for barter, such as cheese, and in rearing livestock. Tsewang, aged 74, described his *dokpa* lifestyle as follows,

> We were nomads. We had animals such as yak, dri, and sheep. We got milk from the animals, and we churned this milk into butter, curd, and cheese. We bartered cheese, milk, and wool when we go to the Rongpa [Nepal] side for rice, wheat, and barley. Yaks were used for transportation. It took around 15 days for the round trip. Most of our food came from the Rongpa side. We paid taxes to the government for the income that we derived from our nomadic livelihood.

He describes how taxes were based on the animals that his family owned. For example, for male animals, he paid in silver, and for female animals, taxes were paid in butter. The silver went to the Central Government and the
butter to the three religious organizations (i.e., Sera, Gaden, and Drepung) in Tibet.

**Hardships of Fleeing One’s Homeland**

Most participants went into exile after 1959, when they learned that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had fled to India. Dornam and Pema fled in 1957 because of their monastic association. Sonam left Tibet to live with her sister in India after the death of her parents because she worked as a servant for a wealthier family in her town and was treated poorly. The remaining 11 participants left Tibet after 1959. Gyalpo was recruited as a member of the security entourage accompanying the Dalai Lama on his way from Tibet to India.

Like many other refugees in similar situations, they experienced losses of family, social ties, livelihood, and material possessions. Some had family members who were executed by the Chinese occupiers, whereas others lost family members because of the effects of living in an occupied nation or because of hardships encountered during the flight itself. A few participants have siblings whom they left behind in Tibet, and they have never heard from them since. Gyalpo, aged 77, recounted the loss of his family members,

> My maternal uncle, who was a government official, was taken by the Chinese in 1959 to China. He was mistreated in Nagchu, where he died. When Tibet lost independence, my father was also taken as a prisoner, and he died in 1959. One year later my mother was taken as prisoner, and she was incarcerated for seven years, and was released in 1975 . . . and she died three months later. My brother and sister were sent to China among 60 Tibetan children whose parents were government officials . . . They were sent there to be “re-educated.” Of the 60 only 12 returned [to Tibet], and no one returned after that. My siblings may be in China, and I do not have any clues about their whereabouts and their lives.

In addition to the loss of family members, participants also experienced loss of economic support. Many either sold their livestock for cheap prices during their flight or left the animals in the pasture because it was simply impossible to walk from one country to another with children, older family members, and animals. Merely staying alive was a great challenge at that time of fear and flight. To survive, some participants begged as they travelled. Participants who fled through Nepal often lived there for several years until they were able to obtain legal papers permitting them to enter India.
Experiences While Living in India

The first phase of life on entering India consisted of working as unskilled laborers (i.e., road workers), on road construction or of entering the Tibetan army called 22, a military unit of Tibetan serving the Indian army. After many years in India, some participants then began their second phase, which involved working in the sweater business. They started by knitting sweaters, selling them, and later moved on to running small retail businesses of their own for which they bought sweaters in bulk from factories in Ludhiana, India.

Older Tibetans living in the community. Of the 8 participants from Dickyiling and Mussoorie, 5 had worked as road workers or “coolies” in North India. They did so during their early years in India because they did not understand the new language and culture and they lacked education and financial resources to engage in better livelihoods. Though difficult and dangerous, jobs related to road construction were the only ones available. Yangzom, aged 65, described her experiences:

I suffered a lot during the time when we were coolies. We lived hand to mouth. The wages were Rs. 2.75 for a day for women and Rs. 3.25 for men. [In 1960s, a rupee was roughly equivalent to 10 cents in American currency; 3.25 rupees is about 33 cents]. Then there was also Rs. 0.75 if you carry 100 bricks. When I first started, it was difficult to carry 10 bricks at a time. Then after getting used as Nepali coolies, I was able to carry 20 or 25. My husband was able to carry 55 or 60 bricks at a time. But we were happy. There were so many Tibetans like us. We would take ration and kerosene on debt and repay when we got the wages. My son was very young and was just able to walk. I wasn’t able to take him to work, and I would tie him to a tree with a rope and place a blanket underneath him and put stones on the four corners. I would give him a jerky, and sometimes he would fall asleep chewing the jerky and sometimes he would fall asleep chewing on the stones. We worked really hard then.

The lives of those who did not work on road were hardly easier. Three participants worked in a Tibetan handicraft society established with assistance from the Dalai Lama. Dolma, aged 78, proudly described its formation:

We had no house, but we inaugurated the Tibetan Handicraft factory. We were brave then. There were 63 of us who came together to establish this factory. The main persons were my husband and me. We requested money from His Holiness, and he granted us Rs. 5,500. I also put my Rs. 1,000 into the factory. This society was established in 1963, and I worked there for seven years.
After a few years, the three left their jobs in the Handicraft factory because of dire poverty. This phase of their livelihood in India was difficult because they were only able to subsist marginally by working on road construction and handicraft factories. Eventually, with new ideas and ways, these participants assumed other ways of earning a living, such as establishing sweater selling businesses, which began a second phase of their livelihood in India.

**New ideas and ways to survive.** Although difficult in its initial stages, this endeavor eventually lifted them out of poverty and allowed them to have decent lives. Along the way, they gained language proficiency by engaging with local who were their customers. The sweater selling first started as a seasonal business where the participants traveled to different places such as Delhi, Varanasi, and Haridwar during the winter months to sell sweaters. During the summer months, they knitted sweaters to sell in the winter. Later, with some progress, better language and other skills to understand the demands of the market, and some money, they began buying ready-made sweaters from factories in Ludhiana and travelled to different places such as Roorkee, Delhi, Haridwar, Varanasi, and Dalhousie to sell them. Later, this seasonal business turned into a yearly occupation, with a different base for summer and winter. Younten, aged 70, recounted his sweater selling experiences:

We started selling hand knitted sweaters as everyone else . . . Then, we were able to buy sweaters from Ludhiana and sell in different places. And then, the sweater business improved from one bistara [bag] to two and more. We went to different places to sell sweaters. We would have the sweaters on our hand and in a back pack which we would carry and our children by our side. We worked like this and made progress. Then all Tibetans started going into sweater business, and their livelihood improved.

The sweater business helped these participants live a better life. At the time of the interview, all the participants were retired. They spent their days saying their prayers because their children had assumed the role of financially providing for their parents. All of the community-dwelling participants regarded that they were living quite acceptable lives although none of their children live with them. Rather than living with their children as was customary in traditional Tibetan society, the participants lived on their own in rented apartments that are paid for by their children. Their children who were working for the Tibetan Government in Exile, were engaged in a yearly sweater selling business in other cities in India or had migrated to Europe and to North America.

Migration of Tibetans to the developed world started first with the Tibetan resettlement to Switzerland in the early 1960s (Corlin, 1991; Ott-Marti, 1976) and continued most recently with Tibetan resettlement to the United States in the
1990s (Hess, 2006). In the last two decades, migration to developed nations (with the most sought-after destinations being the United States, Canada, and the European Union) has become popular, thus leaving an increasing number of older relatives behind to fend for themselves.

Support received by the participants from their children was mostly monetary in nature. The parents have no savings and receive no governmental pensions. The children provide them their sole source of income, which allows them to live comfortably in a rented apartment, buy groceries, contribute money toward religious activities, and hire locals to help with cooking, cleaning, and other household chores. The children visit them occasionally and keep in touch with their parents via telephone.

**Older Tibetans living in old people’s home.** Participants living in the OPH had been there for varying amounts of time, ranging from a few years to more than two decades. Like the participants from the community, older Tibetans in the OPH also worked as coolies. Dolkar, aged 84, entered the OPH when she was no longer able to perform the heavy work required. Lhakyi, aged 84, worked by selling cooked goods all her life and entered the OPH more than 20 years ago. Sonam, aged 77, entered the OPH because she had no other place to go after the death of her second husband.

The three male participants from the OPH entered the Tibetan Army on fleeing from Tibet. They fought in the Bangladesh War and remained in the Army until they retired. They received no pensions as Tibetan army retirees are not entitled to pensions. Thus, on retirement, these participants were once again plunged into poverty. Two of them, Dhondup, aged 78, and Namgyal, aged 70, moved to the Rajpur Tibetan settlement, while Gyalpo, aged 77, moved to the Lakhanwala Tibetan settlement. When they became ill and/or were unable to care for themselves, they were admitted to the OPH.

OPH residents are free to move within its boundaries of the OPH. The residents can engage in chores of their liking when they do not meet for communal time, such as morning prayers and meal times. Many residents congregate in small groups to talk or pray. They are not required to attend all meals. Residents may take their meals in the dining hall, eat meals in their room, or anywhere else in the OPH. For safety reasons, residents must inform the matron or director in case they intend to leave the OPH premises for any reasons.

**Changing Relationships With Children/Relatives**

All participants living in their own homes, who have children, directly or indirectly suggested that their children were supportive and that they are satisfied in their old age. According to Yangzom, aged 65,
I suffered when I did, and now I am happy. My son tells me to be happy and stay at home. He is a very good son. When we were coming into exile, it was difficult times, but now since nine or ten years I have no concerns. I have good children, and they do not make me angry. If my children are well, and they are successful, I have nothing else to worry about. I have no problem. My children tell me to be happy. They tell me to pray and not fear death. They tell me to enjoy this human life and make myself happy.

Similarly, Dolma, aged 78, expressed the importance of a relationship with children in old age,

Life was very hard until 1978. Then my eldest son started doing the business, and it became better after that. One of my daughters is in Switzerland and then another one immigrated to the United States. They provided assistance for me and then my other sons immigrated also. Now everyone takes care of me. I am well cared after, and I am happy.

For Dolma (and for other participants with children) care signified monetary support that allowed her to live comfortably by hiring a local person who helped her with necessary functional assistance in chores such as cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping. As is customary of Tibetans their age, their days are filled with prayers and other activities. Thus, participants who are living in the community and who are cared for by their children appeared to be living independent lives.

For Sonam, aged 77, living the OPH, family support was not forthcoming. She had nieces and nephews, but they did not provide for her. She was disappointed with her relatives’ lack of reciprocity. She did not accept her life in the OPH and hoped her relatives would someday take her from there and care for her in their homes. She was sad and disapproved of her present state,

I have nieces and nephews. They are rich, but they do not care for me. My step-daughter in America used to look after us when my husband was alive, but she does not anymore. I raised her since she was 12 years old. She does not look after me at all. Now I don’t have money, and no one cares for me. But when I was working, I had money and my husband was alive, they all came calling aunty, aunty. I have looked after them then, but they do not care for me.

**Nostalgia for Home**

The older Tibetans’ longing for home and its freedom indicates that they still equated “home” with Tibet. For these refugees, meanings of the concept “homes”
are many. Home was a place of responsibility where the needs of the family were fulfilled. Home was also a place where children were raised, a place of security, and freedom (Rowles, 1993; Somerville, 1997). All these meanings were embodied in their understanding of Tibet, which engendered nostalgia for their lost home and country. Dolma, aged 78, revealed her strong hope for an independent Tibet:

Home is in Tuo Bawa [Tibet]. If we get independence, I will return back. But if I die that’s it . . . Before I die, if I hear that we got our independence, then my children can return back. If I die, it is okay, as long as my children can return. Your land is your land. You can live freely without fear of other people.

Similarly, Gyalpo, aged 77, expressed an increased desire in old age to remember his country and an increasing nostalgia for his homeland,

When birds get old, they miss their nest, when people get old, they miss their land.

Although home was regarded as a place where the family lived together, a place of responsibility and fulfilment of needs, they did not regard India as their home. Most participants equated their status in India with that of being a renter, albeit a gracious one. Such feelings were amplified by Tsewang, aged 74,

In India we have rented a place to stay. India is a good renter. It is a grateful country. It is because of the blessing of His Holiness that we are able to stay here, else we would be given back to China.

Gratitude for family and the Dalai Lama. All 8 participants from the community said that they were satisfied with their lives because they had few worries. Participants from the OPH also seemed content with their OPH life because it fulfilled their basic needs of shelter, food, and clothing. However, some mentioned that it would be nice to have a little money to offer butter lamps for praying and to buy yogurt occasionally to improve the taste of their food. Nevertheless, all 6 said that they were grateful to the Dalai Lama who made it possible for them to live in the OPH, which took away their concerns for food and shelter. For Dhondup, aged 78,

The blessing of His Holiness has made it good in the OPH. We do not have to worry about our food here. We do not have money to make offerings. Other than that our livelihood is all right because we do not have to worry about our food and shelter.
Both participants living in the community and in the OPH expressed concern for Tibet’s independence, for the health of the Dalai Lama, and for the future of Tibet. Namgyal, aged 70, worried,

I am concerned about not having my own country and its independence. No matter how happy you are in other’s country, you still do not have all the freedom. That’s my concern and nothing else. My livelihood is okay due to the Blessing of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Discussion

The life course perspective was used to understand the experiences of 14 Tibetan elders in Tibet and changes that they went through and adaptations they made in exile (Elder, 1975, 1998). Using this framework, the findings reveal how the refugee experience has forever changed their lives. The refugee experience of loss of homeland and consequent arduous journey is similar to that of other refugees from countries such as Bosnia and Vietnam (Keyes & Kane, 2004; Nghe et al., 2003; Timberlake & Cook, 1984). The study participants rebuilt their lives and worked diligently to succeed in India. Many underwent several occupational changes from being nomads, farmers, and monks to being construction workers, handcrafters, and soldiers, as these were the only employment options available to Tibetan refugees in India during the 1960s. Options were limited because they were uneducated and unfamiliar with the language, culture, and workings of the new country (Conway, 1975; Woodcock, 1970).

After almost one decade in India, on settling there and after understanding the culture and gaining language skills, some participants began a sweater selling business. This business eventually helped them escape from poverty and enabled them to have better lives. When their children were old enough to work and earn a good living, participants retired and devoted time to religious activities.

In addition, the participants experienced changing family dynamics, as traditional notions of caregiving no longer applied in India. For example, their children had to move to different places for employment. Coresidence, normative in Tibet (Goldstein & Beall, 1997), was not prevalent among this sample. None of the participants were living with their children. However, they reported receiving ample financial support from their children to live a comfortable old age devoid of worries associated with meeting their basic needs.

Studies concerning older immigrants have also reported changing living arrangements, including different and often negative family dynamics that have occurred because of residence in another nation in which the culture and expectations are different (Ahmadi & Tornstam, 1996; Choudhry, 2001; Kalavar & van Willigen, 2005). Despite changes with their care-receiving patterns, parents
reported being satisfied with financial support from their children. Because of increased opportunities, most children migrated to the West, gained government positions, or established livelihoods for themselves elsewhere in India. Older Tibetans accepted these changes because it was potentially beneficial to both and necessary for children’s better future.

The OPH became the care provider for 6 participants living in this institution. Although living in an institution was not what they had anticipated, they accepted it because it was the best support they can get. Their cultural expectations of care from children could not be fulfilled because they never had children, or they lost their children during difficult initial years in India, or were unable to seek the help of younger relatives because of changes in familial expectations.

In old age, all participants were concerned about their homeland, its freedom, the health of the Dalai Lama, and the health of their children. When questioned about the meaning of home, the older Tibetans felt as if they were “renters” in India. Even after living in India for nearly five decades, they emphasized that India was still not their home. For them, only Tibet was home. Only when Tibet achieved its independence would they have their home back.

Hope for Tibet’s independence remained deeply seated in the minds of the older Tibetans. Although aware of the very slim chance of it happening, some said that if they heard about Tibetan independence, even at the time of their death, they would be happy because they would know that their children could return to their country to enjoy the freedom of living in their own nation. Their heartfelt concerns for Tibet’s independence may well be due to their yearning for the security that comes from living in homeland and perception of freedom.

The older Tibetans revered the Dalai Lama. For them, the Dalai Lama symbolizes Tibetan identity, national history, and the struggle for a free Tibet (Houston & Wright, 2003; McGranahan, 2005). The Dalai Lama is a constant reminder of their lost home, and consequently, Tibet symbolizes a sacred and imagined home for the entire Tibetan community (Anand, 2000; Houston & Wright, 2003; Routray, 2007).

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample is not representative of all older Tibetans living in the region but is a convenience sample. Tibetans in India live in 35 different Tibetan settlements, which are largely agricultural settlements. Therefore, the experiences of older Tibetans living in agricultural settlements could be very different from this group. Participants engaged in various livelihoods in India and were able to adapt linguistically. However, older Tibetans in other settlements who have lived most of their lives as farmers might not have achieved such language skills. Second, no data were obtained on how much financial support participants received from their children. This information was not gathered because to do so would have been viewed by the participants
as insensitive and intrusive. Third, recall bias may have influenced participants’ answers, as they were asked about their life many decades ago. Finally, social desirability bias may also have affected their responses. Some participants may have exaggerated their satisfaction and support from children and other entities to show their gratitude for what they receive. Especially for those in the OPH, participants may regard it as disgraceful to report dissatisfaction with care. Participants may have felt that disclosing any negative emotions to me, a Tibetan youth and student, may also not be appropriate.

Despite limitations, this study offers insight to the broader field of refugee, displaced, and immigrant aging. This is the first known study utilizing a life course perspective depicting how older Tibetans have lived and have adapted to the sociocultural elements of living in exile. Using this perspective, the case studies reveal how some older Tibetans have adapted to their new lives in India and how they have also adapted to changing dynamics of intergenerational relationships. The findings highlight the strength of human agency in persevering through difficult times.

In addition, the life course perspective helps explain the important contribution of support received from external agencies, such as a receptive host nation (India) and the well-coordinated efforts of the Exile Tibetan government in rebuilding the lives of Tibetan refugees. The life course perspective presents the positive impact of Tibet’s spiritual and political leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as a constant source of hope who has eased the adaptation process of the older adults. Finally, the perspective brings forth the significance of the Tibetan religious beliefs of karma (i.e., one is responsible for one’s actions) and the acceptance of difficult circumstances (i.e., as one’s karma has contributed to an individual’s adaptation to life stresses).

Three implications emerge from this study for the field of refugee, displaced, and immigrant aging. First, to secure the lives of older refugees and older adults around the world, particularly, developing nations, it is imperative that governments, international aid agencies, and local communities create viable safety nets similar to old age benefits for older adults who are financially strained. Old age benefits in the form of social security and pensions that are available in many developed nations are lacking in developing countries. Such benefits are critically needed by older adults who do not have younger relatives to support them.

Second, refugees should be given opportunities and rights in their host nation to help them prosper and rebuild their lives and promote a sense of belongingness. Tibetan refugees in India do not have rights to citizenship that curtails their feelings of security in their host nation. Their lack of rights in India may exacerbate their feeling of homelessness, even after decades of residence there. Finally, there is need for education of both older adults and children to help them
understand their experiences, capabilities, and commitments to promote a common expectation of roles and responsibilities between generations.

To conclude, the older Tibetans remain actively engaged in religious activities. Engagement in religious activities and the ability to freely practice their religion has contributed to overall satisfaction with life in exile. Older Tibetans perceived that they were well cared for by their children, which also added to their satisfaction. Those living in the OPH, those who have no children and who were without any source of support were less satisfied. Most important, for all participants, Tibet continued to be a sacred place. Tibet is the home to which they hope to return; they associate Tibet with greater freedom in all aspects of their life. The perception of a lack of real independence in India was connected to their feeling of being only a “renter” in India, despite five decades of residence. Truly, older Tibetans were like the birds missing their nest—they longed to return to the land so sacred to them.

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